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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000578

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA POLITICAL UPDATE: 2/14/2004

REF: CARACAS 00552 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for Reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

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Summary: (Note: The Following message was e-mailed to the  
Department  
on 2/14/2004 and is reported by cable for the  
record.)  
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11. OAS:

-- (C) OAS chief of staff Francisco Jaramillo told the Ambassador February 13 that the National Electoral Council (CNE) board meeting with the Carter Center and OAS was "a disaster." Jaramillo said the CNE refused an OAS and Carter Center proposal to bring fingerprint experts from the Mexican government to analyze signature forms.

12. Opposition:

-- (U) Streets and freeways in the eastern sections of the city were awash with thousands of opposition demonstrators peacefully congregating February 14.

-- (C) Opposition representative told poloff February 14 that the march was a success, estimating 500,000 opposition demonstrators, but it would not continue to the CNE building because it was blocked by GoV security forces and sympathizers armed with clubs.

13. GoV:

-- (U) The Ministry of Interior and Justice announced at the end of the march that everything had been carried out in peace. MinInt officials had warned opposition leaders on February 13 that the GoV could not guarantee their safety if they marched to the CNE building.

-- (U) The GoV mounted a large open food market, with free medical clinics, naturalization fairs, and cultural events, in the path of the march.

-- (U) Official GoV television used a split screen with selective footage to play down the numbers of participants in the march.

-- (U) Chavez said on February 13 he would appeal any decision by the CNE allowing a presidential recall referendum to the Supreme Court.

14. CNE:

-- (U) CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez (pro-GOV) said February 13 the CNE board will announce criteria to be used in the verification process by the Superior Technical Commission (CTS) on February 16.

-- (U) Rodriguez also said the CNE believes the controversial signature forms alleged to have been filled out in the same handwriting may exceed 50,000 signature sheets (or approximately 450,000 signatures).

-- (C) On February 13 CNE Vice President Zamora (opposition) threatened not to attend further meetings in the CNE board until the "encirclement" of the CNE by pro-Chavez activists ("chavistas") is ended.

End Summary.

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CNE meeting with OAS and Carter Center a "Disaster"  
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15. (C) The Ambassador met on the evening of February 13 with OAS chief of staff Francisco Jaramillo for a readout on the National Electoral Council (CNE) board meeting with the Carter Center and OAS earlier that day (reftel). Jaramillo confirmed that the pro-Chavez activists camped out around the

CNE building made getting to the building nearly impossible. Jaramillo said when his car was stopped by traffic, he jumped on the back of a motorcycle-taxi to arrive late to the meeting.

**16. (C)** The meeting, said Jaramillo, was "a disaster." The Carter Center and the OAS proposed bringing fingerprint experts from the Mexican federal prosecutor's office to take a random sample of 1,000 signature forms (about 8,500 signatures) for an analysis, he said. The CNE board rejected the proposal. The OAS and Carter Center representatives then shared the statement they were about to read to the press (see reftel) and then left for the press area. After Carter Center representative Jennifer McCoy left for a meeting with President Hugo Chavez, Jaramillo returned for a wrap-up with CNE President Francisco Carrasquero. Jaramillo said Carrasquero was furious with both organizations for allegedly making proposals that tried to shortcut the CNE's procedures.

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Opposition March: Peaceful and Growing  
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**17. (U)** Opposition marchers started massing February 14 at about 10:00 a.m. at several gathering points in Caracas. By mid-day, streets and freeways in the eastern sections of the city were awash with thousands of opposition demonstrators peacefully congregating. Opposition plans called for marchers to converge from six points around the capital to Plaza Venezuela near the Botanical Garden to collect printed certificates showing copies of their signatures to petition for a residential recall referendum.

**18. (C)** Opposition statistic expert Amado Dounia told poloff at 2:30 p.m. that the march had been a success, but it would not continue to the CNE building because it was blocked by Gov security forces. Douia said Miranda State Governor Enrique Mendoza suspected an ambush after observing the number of troops and a band of Gov sympathizers carrying clubs in the proximity. Dounia guessed that 500,000 opposition demonstrators took to the streets in Caracas.

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Gov Organizes Events To Block March Route  
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**19. (C)** Officials of the Interior Ministry asked the opposition yesterday via press conference not to march farther than the Botanical Garden due to lack of security. The Gov also mounted a large open market on Avenida Bolivar in the capital, in the path of the planned opposition march, on February 14. The Gov announced late on February 13 that in addition to a Gov-subsidized meat sale, there would also be free medical services, free medicines, an express naturalization process, and music concerts. The DCM walked the Gov-sponsored megamarkets before the opposition march began, noting tens of thousands of people. The DCM noted the market was not overtly partisan or hostile, with many apparently attracted by the fifteen percent price break on meat and vegetables.

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Tricky Gov TV Claims No March  
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**10. (U)** Official Gov television showed used a split screen to show selective footage on February 14 depicting higher concentration of people at the Gov's megamarket than at the opposition march. The right side showed a close-up of the Gov-sponsored crowd assembled for its cultural events and food markets. The left side showed sections of empty road in Caracas, purporting to indicate that few showed up for the opposition's march. Keeping with the theme, Vice President Jose Rangel announced February 14 that the opposition was invisible. Nevertheless, all other commercial media outlets showed thousands of marchers in all areas of the planned march route. The Gov footage showed the same truck passing

the same empty street over and over, suggesting that the Gov TV was using a video loop. PD Off observing the opposition march confirmed huge crowds massing in the capital's eastern sections.

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Chavez Pledges Legal Challenge if CNE Calls a Referendum  
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**11. (U)** During his press conference to foreign correspondents on February 13 (carried live for 2 hours by Gov mandate on all/all media outlets in the country), Chavez said he would appeal any forthcoming decision by the CNE to allow a presidential recall referendum to the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ). Only if the TSJ upholds a referendum, Chavez said, would he participate.

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CNE Expects New Rules for Technical Review Committee  
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112. (U) CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez (pro-GOV) February 13 announced the CNE board will discuss rules for the verification of signatures to be used by the Superior Technical Commission (CTS) during the weekend on February 14 and 15, and announce final criteria on February 16. Rodriguez also said the CNE believes the controversial signature forms alleged to have been filled out in the same handwriting (the so-called "planillas planas", see reftel) may exceed 50,000 signature sheets (or approximately 450,000 signatures). Rodriguez did not/not address when the CNE would provide rules for the possible 5-day period during which voters listed on questionable signature forms could come to the CNE in person to affirm their name and signature.

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Zamora Worries About Chavistas, New Schedule at the CNE  
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113. (C) On February 13 CNE Vice President Zamora (opposition) threatened not to attend further meetings in the CNE board until the "encirclement" of the CNE by pro-Chavez activists ("chavistas") is ended. Zamora complained about having to enter the CNE building through back entrances to avoid the Chavista camp in front of the building. The Chavistas have moved back 20 meters since February 13, and National Guard troops continue to guard the perimeter. Zamora said the CNE approved a schedule on February 13 for the rest of the verification process, but it has not yet been published.  
SHAPIRO

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